A Different Triangular Trade – from the Antilles to the Levant via Marseille

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For France to export coffee to Cairo seems a bit like bringing coal to Newcastle, beans to Boston or cows to Calgary.¹ Yet, that's exactly what happened in the eighteenth century as coffee from the Antilles flooded into Egypt. By mid-century, merchants from Marseille sold coffee from Martinique “with success” in Cairo and Alexandria. According to commercial expert Philemon Savary, Caribbean coffee sold just as well in other Levantine ports, especially Constantinople, Smyrna, Salonica and Sidon. Nor was coffee the only product of the Antilles passing in ever greater volume to the Near East through Marseille. In the eighteenth century, every major European colonial power including France exported sugar to the Levant, but indigo from Saint-Domingue became increasingly vital to the manufacture of Ottoman textiles.² This paper focuses on coffee, partly for brevity and partly because of the incongruity of bringing coffee from the Antilles back to the region of its birth.

To set the scene: Almost all coffee grown in the Levant came from the Mocha region in modern-day Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula, the site of the first recorded use of this wonderful bean. At the beginning of the seventeenth

¹ This paper is drawn from the research for my current monograph project entitled Economic Development in Early-Modern France: The Privilege of Liberty, 1650-1820 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), forthcoming that focuses heavily on Marseille's Mediterranean trade. My research was funded by a Summer Stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a Summer Grant from Manhattan College.

century, travellers’ accounts from the Levant mention coffee, but with little favor because it was mixed with the dregs and served without condiment. Ottoman law banning the export of all food products to Christians also played a role in diminishing European interest. Once the habit of adding sugar took hold however, everything changed. From 1644, merchants from Marseille, operating through Muslim and Jewish intermediaries, imported vast amounts of Levantine coffee to satisfy the thirst of café society at court, in Paris and in other large cities. Marseille’s first coffeehouse opened in 1671 a year before the first in Paris. Noted author on trade, Jacques Savary de Bruslons, reported,

The Turks and other Muslims . . . drink coffee frequently and they believe it has certain virtues and extraordinary qualities. The French and English who imitate and perhaps surpass the Muslims in their consumption of coffee, cede nothing in the surprising and nearly miraculous attributes that they ascribe to it. Not only does coffee cure headaches, but it is sovereign for reviving the spirit and becoming gay.

So rapidly did coffee become an important commercial item, that in 1686, French ambassador Pierre de Girardin made obtaining the right for French merchants to purchase Mocha coffee directly a priority. De Girardin also managed to get the tax for French merchants in Egypt lowered from twenty to three percent. By the end of the seventeenth century, 600,000 kilograms of coffee worth more than one million livres comprised two-thirds of French annual imports from Egypt.

Marseille monopolized this thriving trade by right. In 1666, Louis XIV made Marseille a free port. Three years later, the Bourbon administration exempted Marseille, along with Rouen, from a new twenty percent tax on all goods coming from the Levant. Distance and the frequent intervention of the British, Dutch and Spanish fleets ensured that Marseille enjoyed a de facto monopoly that became de jure in 1685. The state then granted Marseille entrepot status for various goods, including coffee in 1693. As an entrepot, coffee paid no duties when imported into and then warehoused in Marseille if it was then exported. But if the coffee entered France, regular customs duties were collected. Although suspended briefly from 1703 to 1706, Marseille’s entrepot status attracted not only Spanish and Italian ships, but also Dutch and English

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3 The two previous paragraphs are based on Paul Masson, Histoire du commerce français dans le Levant au XVIIe siècle (Paris: Hachette, 1896), 413-14, 505, Savary de Bruslons with Savary, Dictionnaire universel de commerce, I: 722 and Charles Carrière, Richesse du Passé Marseillais: Le port mondial au XVIIIe siècle (Marseille: Chambre de Commerce et d’Industrie de Marseille, 1979), 54.
merchants who either did not wish to travel to Egypt or could not acquire sufficient stocks of Mocha in the Near East.

Marseille had to defend its privileges not only against foreign competition but also against other ports that wanted a piece of this lucrative trade. In 1710, Marseille's merchant elites complained to Chancellor de Pontchartrain that ships from Saint-Malo were short-circuiting their trade by paying premium prices for Mocha in Red Sea ports. Without coffee to purchase in Cairo, patterns of exchange throughout the Mediterranean were upset. The Malouins claimed that they had acquired the right to trade in the Red Sea from the East Indies Company and that, in wartime, no trade monopolies should be enforced. In this battle of competing privileges for control of the Levantine coffee trade, the Marseillais held the upper hand. De Pontchartrain ordered the Malouins to stay out of the Red Sea except as corsairs. Although attempts to impinge on Marseille's privileges recurred frequently, in the eighteenth century, Marseille's would-be competitors usually wanted to purchase Levantine cotton or sell French manufactures and thus were not central to the story of the coffee trade. Marseille's position as France's and the Mediterranean's coffee entrepot remained intact until the outbreak of the Revolutionary wars.4

After the War of Spanish Succession, the French mania for Levantine coffee became even more obsessive. Marseille's merchants bought nearly 3.5 million livres worth of Mocha in 1714 and 1715 to slake pent-up demand. In the early 1720s, unrestrained and ill-considered purchases by French merchant factors, desperate to secure very limited supplies, pushed the price to new heights. This price hike forced Marseille's merchants to compensate by increasing the selling price of Languedocian woolens (their chief export) thereby unsettling the customary terms of exchange and reducing the sale of French manufactured goods. Soaring French demand also enabled locals to raise prices – 100% profit on investment in coffee trading was the norm for Cairo's merchants. At the same time, Egypt's pasha and a number of lower-level bureaucrats saw France's unquenchable thirst for coffee as a wonderful opportunity to solicit considerable bribes to keep coffee caravans moving from the Red Sea ports to Cairo. Despite

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Falling Mocha imports did not mean that the French kicked their coffee addiction. Rather, in a classic example of mercantilist import substitution, in 1722, the interim governor of Cayenne, François de la Mothe-Aigran, acquired coffee seeds from Dutch Surinam that had originally come from Java. The trees bore fruit after three years. Almost immediately, coffee was planted on Martinique, Guadeloupe and Saint-Domingue. The following year, coffee was introduced to the Ile de Bourbon (Réunion).\footnote{Savary de Bruslons with Savary, \textit{Dictionnaire universel de commerce}, I: 722.} Colonial coffee soon flooded into France. A very large proportion was re-exported. Coffee played a vital and often underappreciated part in the eighteenth century’s enormous increase in French trade with the Antilles. What deserves further exploration here was the economic impact of the massive trade in coffee linking Martinique to the Levant.

The rise of the coffee trade from the Antilles was supervised by the West Indies Company whose key privileges dated from 1719. From the collapse of John Law’s system in 1720 until its obliteration in 1769, the much-diminished Indies Company held a legal monopoly on trade with Saint-Domingue, though not with the rest of France’s Caribbean colonies. Marseille benefited from a commercial structure in which ships under the French flag were supposed to sail from one European port to one colonial port and return (until 1765).

Marseille was initially excluded from colonial commerce because it already had so many privileges. The Regency government soon recanted thanks to the prodding of the deputies of commerce, who asserted that “an entrepot is indispensable for Marseille” in their recommendations about how to increase colonial trade. January 1719 letters-patent allowed Marseille to engage directly in colonial commerce with the same three percent tax on the value of the cargo.

Soon afterward, an administrative attempt to strengthen the finances of the Indies Company briefly derailed Marseille’s coffee trade with the Levant. In August 1723, the royal government accorded the Company a monopoly of coffee imports into France. Marseille swiftly and successfully marshaled its patrons and clients to support a bid for an exemption: it came in February 1724. Although the tax burden on Mocha imports was increased to twenty sols per pound (up from twelve sols) and they had to sell coffee intended for the domestic market to the Company, by 1728, Marseille’s coffee imports had recovered to almost 250,000 kilos a year, but soon fell again because of the high taxes. The Levantine coffee trade never again approached its former scale or scope. Sales stabilized only in the mid-1770s. From that point until the Revolution, Marseille imported only 120-150,000 kilograms of Mocha annually.8

In this uncertain situation, the merchant ship Vénus rose from the western sea to help Marseille. On February 11, 1730, the Vénus introduced a few pounds of a new type of coffee. Fresh from a tour of France’s Atlantic ports, the

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Vénus brought samples of a brew with a surprising aroma and a less bitter taste at only one-third the price of Mocha. Letters-patent issued in September 1732, allowed Marseille's merchants to begin importing coffee directly from Martinique. But the Marseillais still had to either re-export the beans or sell them to the Indies Company. From 1736 to 1746, every colonial port could sell Antilles coffee as long as the duty was paid, but the Company retained its monopoly on coffee from the Ile de Bourbon and Mocha brought around the Cape of Good Hope. The duty on coffee was increased to ten livres for every 100 pounds, but Marseille was permitted to export coffee by land to key foreign markets like Geneva without paying customs. The Company's monopoly on domestic sales remained in force from 1746 to 1769, though smuggling was widespread. Until 1785 when the Indies Company was revived, Marseille's privileges encouraged rapid growth.

Although Antilles coffee entering Marseille's so-called “free port” was taxed, because of the entrepot, it was generally re-exported without paying further duties. This tax structure was a major incentive to expand French colonial production to supply other markets. Antilles coffee fueled both growing domestic consumption and the flourishing re-export trade to other parts of Europe. This system, however, does not explain the tremendous success enjoyed by Martiniquan coffee in the Levant where it rapidly captured market share from home-grown beans.9

Merchants from Marseille provided the capital and entrepreneurialism that underlay this commercial success. By 1737, annual coffee imports from Martinique into Marseille reached two million pounds (by weight). Imports surpassed four million pounds in 1764, eleven million in 1773 and topped out at fourteen million pounds annually in 1785. Most of this coffee was re-exported. After mid-century, 2/3 of Marseille’s coffee exports went to the Levant.

Thanks primarily to re-exports to the Levant, Marseille’s merchants went from sending twelve ships a year to the Antilles in 1712-16 to 122 in 1784-88. In exchange for manufactured goods and Provençal agricultural produce, the Marseillais purchased considerable amounts of sugar, but coffee was a close second in value and soon became the port’s largest import good by weight. By 1789, Marseille had surpassed Nantes and Le Havre to become France’s second leading colonial port. Coffee comprised forty-two percent of Marseille’s imports from the Antilles (vs. forty-six percent for sugar) and colonial re-exports represented fifty-two percent of this booming port’s total exports.

Marseille’s expanding coffee trade reflected that of French exports more generally. Saint-Domingue increased its production of coffee from seven million pounds in 1755 to 77 million in 1789. More than half of the world’s coffee was

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grown on the Jewel of the Antilles alone. That same year, the total value of French coffee imports from the islands reached 104 million livres, a mere four million less than sugar. Sugar may have sustained French trade with the Antilles, but coffee filtered ever more rapidly into international networks of exchange.  

The Bourbon state managed this growing trade effectively if not always with maximum efficiency. Competition among French merchants in the Levant was cutthroat and undermined profitability. When a ship docked in a Levantine port, French commercial agents rushed to acquire part of the shipment—sight unseen—to guarantee inventory. Most contemporaries blamed the proliferation of French merchants in the Levant for bidding wars that pushed prices too high, bankrupting merchant houses. From the 1680s, every controller-general of finance tried to convince various groups of merchants from Marseille to create formal organizations to manage the purchase and sale of goods to avoid such ruinous competition.

In 1730, Ambassador Louis de Villeneuve took decisive action. Faced with the bankruptcy of France’s chief commercial houses in Constantinople and Smyrna as well as an enormous glut of unsold woolens from Languedoc, Villeneuve imposed “leagues” for the purchase of incoming shipments of woolens and sugar on the merchant community. Despite widespread complaints from Marseillais merchants who wanted to maximize profit-taking as well as from reformist bureaucrats who resented any limitations on the reign of liberty, the royal council under Cardinal Fleury made the “leagues” mandatory in 1731: merchants who did not participate, or who violated league rules had to return to France. In each Levantine port, the leagues were supposed to “agree on market arrangements” in other words, to fix prices.

The following year, Villeneuve, seconded by the Bureau of Commerce, forced the merchant communities “to divide up sales.” Each firm received a share of incoming cargoes equal to what they could sell in either four or six weeks. Initially, this division applied only to woolens sales in Constantinople, Smyrna and Salonika, but it was soon extended geographically to Aleppo and to Cairo and in terms of products to coffee, sugar and indigo. Thus, Bourbon officials compelled French merchants to create cartels that favored big houses, lowered profits for many firms, and failed to maximize the sale of French goods. It should be noted, however, that the most rapid phase of French commercial expansion in the Near East occurred while these mercantilist limitations to competition were in place. Once this system was lifted in the late 1750s, the pace of growth slowed considerably.  

The meaning of these events for evaluating the importance of trade is complex. This argument mirrors that of Paul Butel for Bordeaux. Les négociants bordelaise : L’Europe et les Iles au XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Aubier, 1974), 125.

commercial competition in early-modern economic development may be debatable, but these incidents clearly show the creativity of Bourbon officials when faced with complex economic problems.

As with all stories about the old régime, this broad-strokes narrative of the evolution of the coffee trade does not do justice to the situation's complexities. The general success of the coffee trade must not obscure the ambivalent role of privilege in economic development. Marseille's trade privileges and coffee entrepot successfully promoted the sale of Antilles coffee in Levantine ports and filled east-bound hulls. This exchange supported Marseille's shipping and increased commercial profits. One chapter (of several) missing from this account is the growing dependence of French industry on Levantine raw materials. France desperately needed olive oil from Crete, Tunisia, and Greece along with cinders from Syria and soda from Egypt to manufacture soap, glass, perfumes and gunpowder. French industrial competitiveness was even more dependent on cotton, silk and wool, both raw and spun, from the Levant. Angora and cashmere wool, raw silk and, especially cotton were essential to French manufacturing. France's chronic cotton shortages, particularly in times of war, made Levantine supplies even more crucial. Although Antilles cotton imports grew more rapidly, Levantine cotton imports increased eight-fold in the eighteenth century from an already high level. French textile production also relied on Levantine dyestuffs like madder, oak apple, and saffron. Antilles goods enabled France to acquire many goods more cheaply and more easily that would otherwise have been possible.¹²

The attention of historians has been fixed on the Antilles for quite some time, but we must not forget or ignore the dynamic role of the Levant and the Mediterranean more generally in French economic development. That this role was facilitated by coffee, sugar and indigo from the Antilles only highlights the global nature of eighteenth-century France's trading networks. Our collective interest in the Atlantic trade should not disguise the essential position of the Near East in these networks and the complicated exchanges among various trading partners facilitated by French merchants. That France's chief Mediterranean port so effectively linked Asia, Africa and Europe to the Antilles further demonstrates the vitality of French entrepreneurship, the role of state-granted privileges in both developing and restraining French commerce, and the competitive realities of France's economic position. As the coffee trade reminds us, France relied on the Mediterranean as well as on the Atlantic for its markets and raw materials. France looked west, but also east. Thanks in part to Marseille's emergence as a genuine world port, France was at a global crossroads during the eighteenth century.¹³

¹³ This term refers to Carrière's main theme in Richesse du Passé Marseillais.